

# **Trayvon Martin, Michael Brown, Eric Garner, Et al.: A Survey of Emergent Grassroots Protests & Public Perceptions of Justice**

by

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## **Abstract**

This paper re-examines the essence of the annual federal holiday that is observed each January to mark the birthday of the late great civil rights leader, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Posing and answering the question, “what is Justice,” the paper weighs in on “Justice” and recent cases of extra-judicial killings of unarmed black men in the United States, examines the mass protests caused by those killings, and the reactions of civic, educational and political leaders. It also analyzes how the American public reacted, through public opinion surveys, to contemporary incidents of extra-judicial killings of unarmed black men in the United States. The paper also reviews international interventions in these matters, such as positions taken by certain organs of the United Nations. The paper identifies and examines a sample of proposals for improving relations between law-enforcement and minority communities, and concludes with the author’s own suggested remedy.

**Key terms:** justice, extra-judicial killings, public opinion surveys, unarmed black men, law-enforcement, civil rights, human rights, constitutional rights

## **Methodology**

The paper employs both primary and secondary data and information from a related university course, library materials, and internet resources to describe and analyze the topic of "Trayvon Martin, Michael Brown, Eric Garner, Et al: A Survey of Emergent Grassroots Protests & Public Perceptions of Justice."

## **Introduction**

This past January 19, 2015, the United States, once again, celebrated an annual federal holiday by which the nation celebrates the birthday and legacy of the great Martin Luther King, Jr. who was assassinated in 1968. This federal holiday, which is held on the third Monday of January each year, was signed into law by President Ronald Reagan in 1983. But this year's celebration took place against the backdrop of a spate of regressive incidents, across the country, which seemed to run counter to the letter and spirit of the civil and voting rights legislative reforms that symbolize a new era of de jure and substantial de facto racial integration in American social life, which was brought about by the Civil Rights Movement of the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century that was ably captained by the late Dr. King, among others.

To this writer, King's federal holiday is not a day for a self-righteous vilification of any particular community or group, nor a day for praise-singing any community or group. Rather, it's a day for somber stock-taking—a day for us, as a community that shares one national space, to self-critically ask ourselves how far we have gone in our various collective, institutional and even individual efforts to narrow the gap between where we are in our race relations and where we would like to be.

## **What is Justice?**

The late Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. is pleasantly remembered not just for his moral vision and advocacy for social justice but also for his spectacular oratorical elegance and philosophical profundity. One of his most erudite declarations is that “injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere” (1963, p. 1). In his April, 1963 famous “Letter from Birmingham Jail,” Dr. King also instructed us on why injustice anywhere must be of concern to all of us. In his words: “I am cognizant of the interrelatedness of all communities and states... We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly affects all indirectly” (p. 1).

From time immemorial, legal practitioners, scholars, philosophers, public officials, religious leaders, national, international and global institutions have written and talked at length about the concept of justice. Ancient Egyptian philosophy posited justice as one of seven cardinal virtues, including truth, propriety, harmony, balance, reciprocity and order (Karenga, 2010, p. 203). Justice is a universally-applicable concept though it does not seem to hold the same meaning for everyone or for every community.

## Dictionary's Definition of Justice

But what is justice? Well, as I prepared this article, I decided to take a look at how *Merriam-Webster's Dictionary* defines justice. I found that the dictionary conveys several notions of justice. The first notion is justice as “the maintenance or administration of what is just, especially by the impartial adjustment of conflicting claims or the assignment of merited rewards or punishments,” second, justice as “the administration of law; especially: the establishment or determination of rights according to the rules of law or equity,” third, there is a notion of justice as “the quality of being just, impartial, or fair,” fourth, the dictionary defines justice as “the principle or ideal of just dealing or right action,” “conformity to this principle or ideal,” or “the quality of conforming to law,” and finally, it defines justice as “conformity to truth, fact, or reason” (“Full Definition of Justice,” 2014).

However, my further search for the meaning of justice led me to a more concrete insight credited to William Penn, described as “an early champion of democracy and a prominent Quaker” who lived between the year 1644 and 1718. As William Penn put it poignantly, “Right is right, even if everyone is against it, and wrong is wrong, even if everyone is for it.”

## Justice and Recent Cases of Extra-Judicial Killings

In recent times, the word “justice” has re-occupied center stage in U.S. national news and analyses as the nation grapples with emerging reports of extra-judicial killings of unarmed black men at various locations, along with the apparent failure of the system of justice to rise to the occasion. *Wikipedia* defines extra-judicial killing as “... the killing of a person by governmental authorities without the sanction of any judicial proceeding or legal process. Extrajudicial punishments are by their nature unlawful, since they bypass the due process of the legal jurisdiction in which they occur” (“Extrajudicial Killing,” 2014). Moreover, the Constitution of the United States says that no “person shall be deprived of life ... without due process of law” (“Fifth Amendment”).

While extra-judicial killings and even genocides<sup>i</sup> have sadly been a long-standing part of the human experience across nations of the world, it would appear that due to modern technologies of instantaneous mass communication, including ubiquitous social media and pocket-size instant video recording devices, news of such killings now tend to spread like wild fire across the globe almost within hours of their occurrence. Not surprisingly, public awareness and public reactions to such outrageous events have escalated.

### **Three High-Profile Examples**

In this paper, I cite and discuss three major examples of extra-judicial killings that have occurred in recent times. The first was a 2013 vigilante's killing of an unarmed Florida teenager, Trayvon Martin although, strictly-speaking, that example does not conform with the preceding definition of extra-judicial killing because the culprit was not necessarily a governmental authority. Nonetheless, you will recall that the killer of Trayvon Martin was subjected to a trial only after a lengthy public protest and demand for his arrest. Much to the chagrin of a cross-section of national opinion, a Florida jury subsequently acquitted the perpetrator—an action that provoked a greater public outrage across U.S. cities. The second, but a more appropriate example was the shooting to death in the summer of 2014 of another black teenager, Michael Brown in Ferguson, Missouri by a white police officer. This time, there was neither an arrest nor a trial of the killer, for a grand jury decided that there was “no probable cause” for prosecuting the killer. Then in late December, 2014, a New York City grand jury also reached another controversial decision that an apparent choke hold-induced death of Eric Garner of Staten Island did not amount to a crime, and so the affected police officer had no case to answer. This grand jury decision was made despite a city of New York's medical examiner's pronouncement that the death of 43-year old Eric Garner was a homicide caused by a chokehold (“Medical Examiner Rules,” 2014).

Although these highly publicized examples of extra-judicial killings in the United States are not the only ones that occurred in recent times, they triggered a wave of wide-spread public protests almost unprecedented in their size and persistence. In addition to this wave of public protests that took place across cities of the United States, notably, on December 14, a crowd of about 25, 000, including family members of a set of extra judicially-executed unarmed young black men, held a march on Washington for “Justice for All” (Barakat, December 14, 2014). Spearheaded by Civil Rights activist, the Rev. Al Sharpton, the march attracted an estimated crowd of 25, 000 although the organizers had reportedly expected a lower turnout of about five thousand. This huge turnout of 25,000 marchers speaks to the intensity of both the passion and anger triggered by the contemporary spate of extra-judicial killings of unarmed black men in the United States. Earlier on that mid-week of December, 2014, Congressional staffers walked out of Congress to make a silent statement with their hands up. Similarly, students at some of the nation's top medical schools called for change as they organized and staged a “die-in” at such institutions as Columbia, Brown and Yale (Canani, 2014). A prominent placard-slogan that cut across these public protests was that “black lives matter.”

## **The Role of the United Nations**

The United Nations documents and tracks occurrences of extrajudicial killings in various countries. In November, 2014, the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, Zeid Ra'ad Al Hussein issued a statement in which he “expressed deep concern about the disproportionate number of young African-Americans who die in encounters with police officers, as well as the disproportionate number of African Americans in U.S. prisons and the disproportionate number of African-Americans on Death Row” (“Eric Garner, Michael Brown cases,” 2014). The UN statement noted that “It is clear that, at least among some sectors of the population, there is a deep and festering lack of confidence in the fairness of the justice and law enforcement systems” (“Eric Garner, Michael Brown cases,” 2014).

In addition, the United Nations Special Rapporteur on Racism, Mutuma Ruteere, issued a statement, asserting that “there are numerous complaints stating that African-Americans are disproportionately affected by ... practices of racial profiling and the use of disproportionate and often lethal force” (“Eric Garner, Michael Brown cases”), and pointed out that “African-Americans are 10 times more likely to be pulled over by police officers for minor traffic offences than white persons” (“Eric Garner, Michael Brown cases,” 2014).

Mireille Fanon Mendes France, Head of the “UN Working Group of Experts on People of African Descent,” said that “the Michael Brown and Eric Garner’s cases have added to our existing concerns over the longstanding prevalence of racial discrimination faced by African-Americans, particularly in relation to access to justice and discriminatory police practices,” and called for “a comprehensive examination of all laws that could have discriminatory impact on African-Americans to ensure that such laws are in full compliance with the country’s international legal obligations and relevant international standards” (“Eric Garner, Michael Brown cases,” 2014).

Indeed, when in November, 2014, the grieving parents of the late Michael Brown (Michael Brown Sr. and Lesley McSpadden) took an extra-ordinary step of flying abroad to the Geneva, Switzerland-based United Nations Committee Against Torture in order to appeal to that global institution for justice for their slain son, their action, in effect, came across as a reflection of what the preceding UN statement characterized as “a deep and festering lack of confidence,” on the part of certain communities of the United States, in the fairness of our justice system (“Michael Brown’s parents,” 2014). The last time that this degree of citizenry cynicism in the ability of our domestic justice system to act fairly towards all was publicly displayed in a high-profile manner was in the pre-Civil Rights era, precisely in July 1964, when the late African American Human Rights Warrior, Malcolm X, appeared before and addressed the General Assembly of the then Organization of African Unity (OAU), now known as the African Union, in order to call attention to systemic and institutional denials and violations of black civil, human and constitutional rights within the United States (Okafor, 2013, p. 219).

## **Student Reflections**

As I observed above, recent cases of extrajudicial killings of unarmed black men in the United States provoked grassroots protests. Across-the-country, university students registered their protests and dismay even on the pages of essays specifically written for course credit. Below is a sample of sentiments expressed by six students in my Fall, 2014 AFC 101 Introduction to African American Studies course at Eastern Michigan University in Ypsilanti, Michigan (a comprehensive co-educational public university located 35 miles west of Detroit and eight miles east of Ann Arbor that currently serves 23,000 students who are pursuing undergraduate, graduate, specialist, doctoral and certificate degrees in the arts, sciences and professions) from a closing course assignment (a writing project) in which they reflected on three of the major themes of the course, including race relations, the high incarceration rates of African American men, and the social policy of Affirmative Action. Not surprisingly, the burning issue of extrajudicial killings of unarmed black men loomed large in their reflections on contemporary race relations in the United States.

### **Eden Zimak:**

As a result of the material presented in this course, I have gained a better understanding of the scope of Africology and African American studies. This course has better helped me to understand the historical and philosophical roots of Black studies, become familiar with land-mark events in African American history, and has engaged me in learning about African Americans in the fight for human and civil rights, each of which [is] stated in the course objectives. Because I have taken this course, I have also obtained skills necessary [to] think critically about race related issues in today's society. Consequently, I feel better prepared to write and reflect on issues like contemporary race relations in the United States, the strengths and weaknesses of Affirmative Action, and the disproportionate incarceration rates of young black males and the impact it is likely to have on the African American family unit.

Since the landmark 2008 presidential election of Barack Obama, many Americans believe that we now live in a "post-racial" society, where the social construct of race no longer affects Black Americans in the same discriminatory ways it had in the past. It takes only a simple scratching of the surface to discover that this assumption is far from true. Despite the election of President Obama, racism is still alive and well in America and one can find evidence of it in contemporary race relations in American culture today.

The claim that racism no longer exists in this country is incredibly harmful because it discredits the issues at hand, leading Americans, particularly White Americans, to believe that there is no longer any reason to question or challenge the dominant White framework. Claiming color-blindness, in effect, renders race “invisible,” and encourages ignorance when it comes to the very real consequences of racism that Black Americans face today. Assuming that racism is no longer an issue in our society actually perpetuates racism because it denies that there is an issue to begin with. How is a society going to solve a problem it doesn’t believe it has? (Zimak, Fall 2014).

**Student Jenny Tith:**

As a college student, and young citizen, I have seen racism in many forms from many different people. Sometimes, people are racist without even knowing it. There are people who believe that everyone is equal and treat people as such, but there are not nearly enough people with that mindset. I find that much of the youth today have a way of behaving with their peers, a way of speaking and interacting, that can come off as racism, but then when it comes down to the bare bones of it, they are not actually racist. ... Racism never completely went away, even though slavery was abolished, and there are anti-discriminatory laws. It is just hidden, and expressed in a different way. Because racism is still being expressed, even if it is behind closed doors, there can be and is hostility towards different people. People are treated differently subconsciously because of the hidden racist feelings (Tith, Fall 2014).

**Kristopher Strange:**

The events that occurred in Ferguson, Missouri and in Staten Island, New York are telling of how race relations, within the country, are becoming an increasing problem. These two deaths in a matter of a few months have caused widespread awareness of a bigger issue than people want to talk about and that is the issue of interracial violence. ... People in our history such as Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., Rosa Parks, Malcolm X, and the Black Panthers all took the initiative to go against what they knew was the norm of society and change it. The generations of black people living in the country today do not have the same desires that those of our past once had nor do they care as much for that matter. Many of those people are content with where they are in life and believe that if they do try to do something to change those issues they will lose all that they have in the process. In other words [,] people of today’s America are selfish (Strange, Fall 2014).

**Jennifer Serrano:**

Within the past sixty to seventy years alone [,] so much has occurred that has reshaped the way Blacks are viewed and the way that they are currently viewed. With that being stated [,] there is still a great deal of changes and implementations that need to be considered in order to break all of the barriers and stigma that comes with the Black race. The contemporary views of race in America [have] made this evident along with societal factors that have influenced transformative changes coming into effect like affirmative action and social welfare.

There is no question as to the origin of racism from Whites to African Americans and it being a systemic problem since the slave trade. The start of the problem came with the abduction of Africans from their homeland and their use as “merchandise” rather than human beings due to the color of their skin. This evolved in our country as a systemic problem, creating ideologies and stigmas with the black population. Through the Emancipation Proclamation of 1863[,] slavery [was abolished] and created an uproar and division in our country. This was not the end of the racial views in America although it was a much needed step forward. Through over 90 years of discriminatory Jim Crow laws, framing American history, racism continued to develop and bring prejudice [against] Blacks, along with certain stereotypes. Despite what many believe [we have] overcome, racism and contemporary racist view [s] exist in America (Serrano, Jennifer, fall 2014).

**Ebony Riley:**

The status of contemporary race relations in the United States is very strained at this time. Recently, racial tensions have escalated resulting in more violence and distrust among minority communities especially when in contact with authorities. Black people are supposed to be living in a post racial time, which seems to only apply to white people. White America views current times as post racial because they have not experienced many of the racial disparities that Blacks and other minorities face sometimes on a daily basis (Ebony, fall, 2014).

**Philip Livingston, Jr.:**

With American policies set the way that they currently are and with the criminal justice system deeply entangled in ages of racial bias and hatred [,] it does seem unlikely that the heart of people can really change that much. I think it may be too big of a leap to be made so soon. Time is the ultimate healer and really the only way change will come. With all the riots and protests in the news [,] it does seem that people are tired of the current situation [,] and I do feel that something will need to be done about the racial situation in America.

The policy of not speaking about it has not healed any wounds and has not deterred the spread of hate. Hate is something that is taught [,] and it can be untaught under the right circumstances. Knowledge is the biggest key to accomplishing this goal. If someone is hateful because of a particular belief, test it and make sure the reason [is] accurate (Livingston, Jr., Fall, 2014).

## The Conscience of the Nation and Polarized Public Opinion

In light of the above comments, as we ourselves—as bystanders, as teachers, students or even as members of the law-enforcement community—sit back and strive to think deeply about the preceding critical views of contemporary race relations proffered by a small cross-section of students, we, perhaps, at this juncture, should recall a pertinent adage that students tend to reflect the conscience of a nation. In a related sense, students, generally, are viewed as leaders of tomorrow, and, thus, their take on matters of the moment may serve as a pointer to how the future of a society may be shaped or the direction in which a nation is headed. Thus, though news media and social media commentaries, in general, suggested that the recent high-profile cases of extra-judicial killings in the United States appeared to have offended the nation’s collective sense of justice, it is worth-noting that proportionately more Blacks than Whites have tended to publicly express objection to what’s perceived as a failure of the system of justice in those widely-publicized cases. For example, a July, 2013 Pew Research Center’s survey of 1,480 adults nationwide revealed that 49% of Whites were satisfied with a Florida jury’s acquittal of George Zimmerman, while only 5% of Blacks felt so. On the other hand, while 86% of Blacks were dissatisfied with the verdict, only 30% of Whites shared that opinion.

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### Race and Reactions to the Zimmerman Verdict

<i>Are you satisfied or dissatisfied with Zimmerman verdict?</i>	<b>Total</b>	<b>White</b>	<b>Black</b>	<b>Hisp</b>
	%	%	%	%
Satisfied	39	49	5	25
Dissatisfied	42	30	86	58
Don't know	<u>19</u>	<u>21</u>	<u>9</u>	<u>17</u>
	100	100	100	100

*In this case...*

The issue of race is getting more attention than it deserves	52	60	13	40
Raises important issues about race that need to be discussed	36	28	78	47
Don't know	<u>12</u>	<u>12</u>	<u>8</u>	<u>13</u>
	100	100	100	100

N                      1,480   1,047   153   166

PEW RESEARCH CENTER July 17-21, 2013. Figures may not add to 100% because of rounding. Whites and blacks include only those who are not Hispanic; Hispanics are of any race.

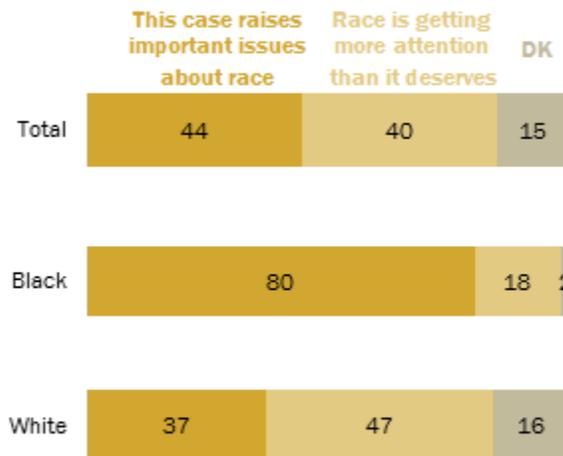
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Findings similar to the preceding ones occurred in a subsequent Pew Research Center’s survey of August, 2014 regarding the late Michael Brown of Ferguson, Missouri. According to the Center, Blacks and Whites reacted significantly differently to both the police shooting of Michael Brown and to the resulting public protests and violence. The Center’s survey reported that ‘Blacks are about twice as likely as Whites to say that the shooting of Michael Brown `raises important issues about race that need to be discussed.’ There were also ‘wide racial differences ... in opinions of whether local police went too far in the aftermath of Brown’s death, and in confidence in the investigations into the shooting’ (“Stark Racial Divisions,” 2014). Hence, the Pew Research Center’s survey showed that more black people than Whites say Brown’s shooting raises racial issues.

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### Blacks More Likely than Whites to Say Brown’s Shooting Raises Racial Issues

*Thinking about the police shooting of an African American teen in Ferguson, Missouri, percent saying ...*



Survey conducted August 14-17, 2014. Whites and blacks include only those who are not Hispanic. Figures may not add to 100% because of rounding.

PEW RESEARCH CENTER

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**Source:** Pew Research Center. (2014, August 14-17). Retrieved from [http://www.people-press.org/2014/08/18/stark-racial-divisions-in-reactions-to-ferguson-police-shooting/8-18-14\\_01-2/](http://www.people-press.org/2014/08/18/stark-racial-divisions-in-reactions-to-ferguson-police-shooting/8-18-14_01-2/).

But, there is an age-related dimension to these Pew Research Center's surveys that some people may or may not interpret as a potential harbinger of a brighter tomorrow in the arena of race relations. It's a finding that ...

Younger Americans express far more dissatisfaction over the Zimmerman trial verdict than do older Americans. Among those under 30, 53% say they are dissatisfied with the verdict and just 29% are satisfied. The balance of opinion is the reverse among those ages 65 and older: 50% are satisfied and just 33% dissatisfied.

But when controlled for race, what became of the age factor? The Pew Research Center reported that ...

The survey data showed the same age-related differences in perceptions of the correctness or lack thereof of the Zimmerman verdict. Thus, among Whites, 39% of survey respondents who fell within the age bracket of 18-29 were satisfied with the verdict, whereas 57% of Whites, ages 50-64 felt that way.

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### Younger Whites Less Satisfied with Zimmerman Verdict

<i>Views on Zimmerman verdict:</i>	<b>Satisfied</b>	<b>Dis-satisfied</b>	<b>DK</b>
	%	%	%
Total	39	42	19=100
18-29	29	53	18=100
30-49	33	44	23=100
50-64	48	37	15=100
65+	50	33	18=100
<hr/>			
<i>Among whites</i>			
All whites	49	30	21=100
18-29	39	41	20=100
30-49	43	29	29=100
50-64	57	27	16=100
65+	56	27	17=100

PEW RESEARCH CENTER July 17-21, 2013. Figures may not add to 100% because of rounding. Whites include only those who are not Hispanic.

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As the foregoing analyses and opinion survey reports have demonstrated, racial polarization was characteristic of public opinions regarding both Trayvon Martin and Michael Brown, but it was less so in the case of Staten Island's Eric Garner. A *USA TODAY* opinion survey of December 9, 2014 reported that ...

Americans by nearly 3-1 say the white police officer responsible for the death of Eric Garner, an unarmed black man being arrested for selling cigarettes, should have faced charges from a Staten Island grand jury... Nearly 9 of 10 also say it would be a good idea for more police officers to wear body cameras to record their interactions... In contrast, by 50%-37% they say a grand jury in Ferguson, MO., made the right decision in deciding not to charge Officer Darren Wilson in the death of Michael Brown (Page, 2014).

Overall, youth, particularly college students, were among members of the public who protested most strongly against these extra-judicial killings. For instance, in the wake of the grand jury decision regarding Eric Garner in December, 2014, the Columbia Law School was reported to have "agreed to delay final exams for students who face "trauma" and disillusionment following two recent, racially-charged cases in which grand juries declined to indict white police officers in the deaths of unarmed black men" ("Columbia Law students," 2014). The news report went on to announce that "students at Harvard and Georgetown want the same dispensation, also saying they just can't face their tests in the wake of the grand jury decisions in Missouri and New York" ("Columbia Law students," 2014). In an attempt to contextualize all this, Robert E. Scott, Columbia Law School's Interim Dean was reported as stating that "For some law students, particularly, though not only, students of color, this chain of events is all the more profound as it threatens to undermine a sense that the law is a fundamental pillar of society to protect fairness, due process and equality" ("Columbia Law students," 2014).

## **President Obama's Views**

Thus far, I have recaptured a synopsis of public opinions on our subject of discussion. Now, let's find out how major leaders of the nation reacted to these controversies. Publicly issued statements have come from federal, state and local leaders, including none other than President Barack Obama. Shortly after news emerged that a New York grand jury would not issue an indictment in the case of Eric Garner, President Obama said:

Some of you may have heard there was a decision that came out today by a grand jury not to indict police officers who had interacted with an individual named Eric Garner in New York City, all of which was caught on videotape and speaks to the larger issues that we've been talking about now for the last week, the last month, the last year, and, sadly, for decades, and that is the concern on the part of too many minority communities that law enforcement is not working with them and dealing with them in a fair way ("President Obama Delivers," 2014).

The President then continued by saying:

As I said when I met with folks both from Ferguson and law enforcement and clergy and civil rights activists, ... this is an issue that we've been dealing with for too long and it's time for us to make more progress than we've made. And I'm not interested in talk; I'm interested in action. And I am absolutely committed as President of the United States to making sure that we have a country in which everybody believes in the core principle that we are equal under the law. And I say that as somebody who believes that law enforcement has an incredibly difficult job; that every man or woman in uniform are putting their lives at risk to protect us; that they have the right to come home, just like we do from our jobs; that there's real crime out there that they've got to tackle day in and day out... ("President Obama Delivers," 2014).

Notice that President Obama's aforementioned comments appropriately called attention to risks associated with police work. Police work was ranked #5 among 10 jobs listed recently as the most stressful occupations in the United States. According to CareerCast.com "the most stressful jobs of 2015 can be physically dangerous [and] psychologically taxing ... ("The Most Stressful Jobs of 2015," 2015).

### **10 the Most Stressful Jobs of 2015**

Name of Job	Ranking
Firefighter	1
Enlisted Military Personnel	2
Military General	3
Airline Pilot	4
Police Officer	5
Actor	6
Broadcaster	7
Event Coordinator	8
Photojournalist	9
Newspaper Reporter	10

**Source:** The Most Stressful Jobs of 2015. (2015, January 7). *CareerCast.com*. Retrieved from <http://www.careerCast.com/jobs-rated/most-stressful-jobs-2015>.

The risky nature of police work received a high-profile concrete expression in late December 2014, when news broke that two police officers of New York City's Police Department were killed by a lone gunman who reportedly acted to avenge two previous 2014 extrajudicial killings of two black men, Michael Brown of Ferguson, Missouri, and Eric Garner of Staten Island, New York. The *New York Post* reported the news with a strikingly emotive headline, "Gunman executes 2 NYPD cops in Garner 'revenge'"—a headline that implicitly spoke volumes, in and of itself, about the rather volatile status of community-police relations during an especially troubled period in this nation's history of human relations.

As that news report put it, "Officers Wenjian Liu and Rafael Ramos were working overtime as part of an anti-terrorism drill in Bedford-Stuyvesant just before 3 p.m. when they were shot point-blank in the head by lone gunman Ismaaiyl Brinsley, 28, who had addresses in Georgia, Maryland and Brooklyn. Moments after killing the two officers, Brinsley, too, was dead, having turned his gun on himself on a nearby subway platform as cops closed in" (Celona, Larry, Cohen, Shawn, Schram, Jamie, et al., 2014).

The news report described the killer of the NYPD officers as "... a fugitive, suspected of putting a bullet in his ex-girlfriend's abdomen at her residence in Baltimore at 5:45 a.m. Saturday [12/19/14] (Celona, Larry, Cohen, Shawn, Schram, Jamie, et al., 2014). The report added that three hours before killing two police officers, Brinsley had posted an Instagram message about what he allegedly intended to do. The news report recaptured the Instagram message as follows: "I'm Putting Wings on Pigs Today. They Take 1 Of Ours. . . Let's Take 2 of Theirs. This May Be My Final Post" (Celona, Larry, Cohen, Shawn, Schram, Jamie, et al., 2014).

A noticeable change in public protest sloganeering and even on television talk shows, following the shooting of the two New York police officers, was a switch from "black lives matter" to "all lives matter." No doubt, all lives do matter, and all lives deserve equal protection of the law.

Generally-known risks associated with law-enforcement, in particular, and security work, in general in the United States and elsewhere, became compounded in early January, 2015, when the news media reported that an organized international terrorist group, known as Islamic State, had posted a video message on the internet in which its spokesperson called for the assassination of "police, security and intelligence members," in four Western countries, namely the United States, France, Australia and Canada. This information was released to the public just a few days after gunmen broke into and killed 12 employees of a French magazine in Paris, France ("NYPD, FBI issue," 2015).

At this juncture, it's apropos to recall that in his address on the issue of public confidence in law enforcement earlier on, President Obama said as follows to the nation:

[Law-enforcement] officers are only going to be able to do their job effectively if everybody has confidence in the system. And right now, unfortunately, we are seeing too many instances where people just do not have confidence that folks are being treated fairly. And in some cases, those may be misperceptions; but in some cases, that's a reality. And it is incumbent upon all of us, as Americans, regardless of race, region, faith, that we recognize this is an American problem, and not just a black problem or a brown problem or a Native American problem ("President Obama Delivers," 2014).

Concluding in a rather climatic tone, Obama declared: "This is an American problem. When anybody in this country is not being treated equally under the law, that's a problem. And it's my job as President to help solve it" ("President Obama Delivers," 2014).

Having recalled the President's comments, at this point, I want to draw attention to a notable fact that, overall, U.S. political leaders' reactions to the December, 2014 grand jury decision regarding Eric Garner, were relatively bi-partisan. For example, in weighing in on this matter, Speaker John Boehner of the U.S. House of Representatives, a Republican, said as follows: "Clearly both of these are serious tragedies that we've seen in our society and I think the American people want to understand more of what the facts were. There are a lot of unanswered questions that the Americans have and, frankly, I have" (Siddiqui, Sabrina, 2014).

President Obama's and Speaker Boehner's were, of course, a tiny glimpse of numerous spoken and written high-profile expressions of concern provoked by the death of Eric Garner. Among academics, one reaction stood out. Dr. Yvette M. Alex-Assensoh, professor of Political Science and Vice President of Equity and Inclusion at the University of Oregon offered a historically-layered poetic commentary that touched on issues that span a period of more than five hundred years. Here is an excerpt from that poem, aptly entitled, "I Can't Breathe:"

I can't breathe...echoes of Eric Garner's last words  
I can't breathe...panic words seeping out under the weight of George Zimmerman's  
attack  
I can't breathe...reflected in the blood flowing from Michael Brown's body  
I can't breathe...confused thoughts in the mind of a 12-year-old playing in the park  
I can't breathe...ignored by police officers, who are paid to protect lives  
I can't breathe...utterances of African slaves on the middle passage  
I can't breathe...stammered by over 5,000 "strange fruits," as they hung from American  
lynching trees  
I can't breathe...whispered by Goodman, Swerney and Chaney as they gave their lives  
for civil rights

I can't breathe...symbols of communities suffocated by unjust policies, practices and laws  
I can't breathe... unearthing racial division and historical amnesia  
I can't breathe...warning sign of a criminal justice system that is run amuck  
I can't breathe...mandate for legislative change  
I can't breathe...rallying cry that awakens a sleeping giant?  
I can't breathe...rebirth of democracy? ("Yvette M. Alex-Assensoh Can't Breathe," 2014).

But Dr. Yvette M. Alex-Assensoh was not the only scholar who waxed poetic and posted a historical spin on these tragedies of our times. Writing from Nigeria, Professor Bolaji Aluko, a long-standing scholar at Howard University and now Vice Chancellor of a Nigeria-based Federal University, was rather crisp in his poetry: "My People: First Ferguson, now Staten Island.....Enough should be enough.....I can't breathe from all this American injustice..." (Aluko, 2014).

Interestingly, in his presidential comments on these controversies, Barack Obama did more than just talk. He announced a multifaceted plan for strengthening community policing in the United States with an overall aim of improving "the relationships between law enforcement agencies and the communities they are obligated to protect and serve." Specifically, the President proposed a three-year, \$263 million investment package that is intended to:

- Increase police officers' use of body worn cameras
- Expand training for law enforcement agencies
- Add more resources for police department reform
- Multiply the number of cities where the Department of Justice facilitates community and local LEA engagement ("Building Trust Between Communities and Local Police," 2014).

The National Urban League, a historic civil rights organization dedicated to economic empowerment in order to elevate the standard of living in historically underserved urban communities, has advanced its own a 10-point proposal for what it described as "police reform and accountability." The League recommended:

- Widespread Use of Body Cameras and Dashboard Cameras
- Broken Windows Reform<sup>ii</sup> and Implementation of 21st Century Community Policing Model
- Review and Revision of Police Use of Deadly Force Policies
- Comprehensive Retraining of All Police Officers
- Comprehensive Review and Strengthening of Police Hiring Standards
- Appointment of Special Prosecutors to Investigate Police Misconduct
- Mandatory, Uniform FBI Reporting and Audit of Lethal Force Incidents Involving All Law Enforcement
- Creation and Audit of National Database of Citizen Complaints against Police
- Revision of National Police Accreditation System for Mandatory Use by Law Enforcement To Be Eligible for Federal Funds
- National Comprehensive Anti-Racial Profiling Law (“10-Point Justice Plan,” 2014).

## **Conclusion**

In conclusion, President Obama’s remedial plan deserves to be implemented with dispatch, and the National Urban League’s 10-point proposal does carry a lot of weight and ought to be accorded serious Congressional, rather than state-level consideration, as ingredients for possible ameliorative legislative measures. But, there is one suggestion that I wish to add to their list of proposed remedies. In truth, it’s not solely my own suggestion but an idea that was also echoed by one of my fall, 2014 students, whose written reflections on contemporary race relations I shared with you much earlier in this paper. That idea is that appropriate education that reflects our racial and cultural diversity, against the backdrop of a commonly and nationally-shared set of democratic ideals and values, holds the key that can help enlighten and broaden minds, replace ignorance and stereotypical assumptions and beliefs with facts and systematic knowledge about component American communities and, thus, help us continue our onward journey towards our desired harmonious co-existence based on mutual respect and justice for all. In the words of the late Martin Luther King, Jr. himself: “Now is the time to lift our nation from the quick sands of racial injustice to the solid rock of brotherhood. Now is the time to make justice a reality for all of God’s children” (“Full Text of Martin Luther King Jr.’s,” 1963).

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<sup>i</sup> See Cooper, A.D. (2009). *The Geography of Genocide*. Lanham: The University Press of America.

<sup>ii</sup> According to J.Q. Wilson and G.L. Kelling, "at the community level, disorder and crime are usually inextricably linked, in a kind of developmental sequence. Social psychologists and police officers tend to agree that if a window in a building is broken and is left un-repaired, all the rest of the windows will soon be broken. This is as true in nice neighborhoods as in rundown ones. Window-breaking does not necessarily occur on a large scale because some areas are inhabited by determined window-breakers whereas others are populated by window-lovers; rather, one unrepaired broken window is a signal that no one cares, and so breaking more windows costs nothing" (1982).